DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 129 PS 017 616

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TITLE Early Childhood Education for Today and Tomorrow: Training Teacher Educators.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Caregivers; Early Childhood Education; *Intervention; *Kindergarten Children; Preschool Children; *Professional Development; *Program Development; *Teacher Education; Tutorial Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of research relevant to early childhood education, reviews some recent intervention programs for preschool and kindergarten children, and investigates the need for policymakers to establish programs based on research findings. Particular attention is given to an intervention research study conducted with at-risk students in four kindergarten classes of two elementary schools. Children were provided with opportunities to interact with adult tutors who were trained to read stories and develop children's language and concepts. Concluding remarks, which cover recommendations of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, concern several avenues for professional training of child care workers. It is argued that there is a need for teacher educators to work closely with secondary schools and vocational schools in an effort to establish clear-cut guidelines for consistent standards and training requirements for those who work with young children. (Twenty-four references are listed.) (RH)

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Early Childhood Education for Today and Tomorrow:

Training Teacher Educators

Beth S. Wise and Judy C. Shaver

The objectives of this paper are to present an overview of research on early childhood education, to review recent intervention programs designed for preschool and kindergarten children, and to investigate the need for policymakers to establish programs based on research findings.

Research since the early 1970's on early childhood development has resulted in a new perspective on the preschool child from birth to six years. Infancy is now seen as a crucial time for laying the foundation for later development. Once viewed as passive beings only reacting to their environments, infants are known today to react to sensory stimuli, interact with others, and to be alert to, as well as observant of, the environment.

Much research has been conducted in the last ten years on how language develops. The behaviorist view purports that language is gradually built up through imitation and reinforcement. Chomsky (1983) has proposed that humans must have an innate ability to process language which he calls a "language acquisition device" (LAD). He attributes children's ability to produce word forms and sentences they have never heard to this LAD (Feeney, Christianson and Moravcik 1983).

Chomsky's theory maintains that children discover how language works. He calls the commonalities of all languages "linguistic universals", and proposes that language is both creative and innate. Children discover how to manipulate language in order to express their own thoughts. Departures from adult language (I saw two mouses) indicate that the child's language is based more on understanding than on imitation.

Current research on literacy is looking at what happens in children regarding writing and reading before formal lessons begin. Young children from

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all socioeconomic backgrounds "read" print in their environment. If read to, they come to understand basic story structure, the idea that print is language written down, and that books are read from top to bottom and front to back. From these beginnings, children learn to recognize the connection between speech and print, and to construct their own rules to explain this relationship. Social interaction about print (between children and between an adult and child) has been found to impact children's understanding of written language.

The relationship between language and cognitive growth has been of interest to a number of prominent scholars. Piaget (1955) was concerned with the role of language in logical cognitive development. He saw cognitive development as the individual's active and unconscious structuring of perceptions within the environment. Studies conducted by Piagetian scholars de-emphasize the role of language in early learning, supporting Piaget's belief that language does not constitute the source of logic, but is, on the contrary, structured by it (Pflaum, 1986).

According to Britton (1976), early language is tied to the here and now and grows its roots in firsthand experiences. If what the child experiences lies entirely outside his expectations so that nothing in his past experiences provides the basis for modification, then he can make nothing out of it. It may constitute an experience for someone else, but not for that child. This is consistent with Piaget's observations which imply growth from a centre: the new can be incorporated only at points where it relates to what is already there.

Oral language activities are the basis for academic skill development. Loban (1979) found that children who ranked high in oral language ability at the kindergarten level also ranked high in reading achievement in later years.

He concluded that proficiency in oral language is basic to achieving competence in reading skills.

Because of the influence of the media, a child may have copied the adult model of language. The new maturity of his speech can easily be mistaken for his level of thought, making it easy for adults to think that he understands more than he actually does (Kirkland, 1978). Although a child may be able to name and identify an object, his concept of it may be vague or inadequate (Robinson, Strickland, and Cullinan, 1977). The child's limited understanding of relational terms, e.g. before/after, same/different, is often mistaken to be the same as an adult's understanding (Clark, 1971). A child's meaning of a word will change as he gains more experience in the world, and this change will generally be in the direction of what an adult speaker would mean (Britton, 1970).

Reading instruction builds on oral language. Often children who enter kindergarten have not grown up with a language model that resembles the language of school or books. Many of them have not been required to use language in reflective ways in the home (Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading, 1984). Readiness activities used in classrooms often call for the young child to recognize similarities and differences and to make other kinds of comparative judgments regarding terms unfamiliar to the child (Robinson, Strickland, and Cullinan, 1977). Formal language programs often force language tasks that are unrelated to the everyday lives of children. If a child is unsuccessful with activities generally expected of children his age, it may be that he has not yet had the kinds of concrete experiences from which to build his understandings. Since one connot use what he or she does not possess, the child must first acquire the necessary developmental background experience (Roney, 1984).

For a number of years, there has been concern throughout the United States about the poor school performance of children reared in poverty. These children have been considered at-risk in the areas of school adaptation and developmental processing. Research studies suggest that there are language differences at school entry between children reared in poverty and children reared in middle-class homes. Differences in parent-child interaction between these two groups have also been found across the preschool years.

Research has focused mainly on two approaches to intervention which seek to facilitate school performance for at-risk children. The first of these is intervention in the home, which has centered on trying to bring about change in mother-child interactions during the preschool years. The other approach centers on intervention in a school situation, whether at the preschool level or during the early elementary years. Joan Tough (1982) conducted a longitudinal research study of young children from different social class groups in England. Her findings suggested that programs devoted to building vocabulary, practice of syntactic structures, and use of locational prepositions were too limitied in scope. She found that the main problem of these at-risk children was not that they generally lacked language (which they did), but that their expectations about using language did not support learning. Her findings suggested that intervention programs should not only be concerned with helping children to become literate, but should also be concerned with developing personal qualities, general skills of communication, and the ability to think and reflect on experiences. The development and use of language must be the means for the at-risk child to develop self-motivated learning. This should be accomplished through the use of language in talking with others.

Dale Farran (1982) reported on a longitudinal study in the United Stated on mother-child interaction patterns during the preschool years. She found that many factors play a role in contributing to the school problems of at-risk children - environment, ethnicity, the dominant culture, and the schools themselves. She found that the place for intervention to facilitate school performance for at-risk children was not in the families, but in the schools.

Research was conducted by Catherine Snow (1982) on social class differences in mothers' speech. Her findings suggested that interactions with children while book reading provided opportunities for novel, complex, and creative use of language. She found these opportunities lacking in the routine conversations in the low-income home.

Lynne Feagans (1982) also studied social class differences in children as they relate to school performance. She found that many intervention programs focused on language skills which were not reinforced in the school environment. She concluded that at-risk children need assistance in using their language to adapt to the language material characteristic of school classrooms. In particular, she recommended that intervention programs for at-risk children focus on the development of dialogue skills, and sequence of moves and events in narrative dialogues. Teachers and schools continue to expect children to use their language to understand and express their ideas within a narrative framework.

Based on this research, an intervention research study was conducted using at-risk students in four kindergarten classes of two elementary schools in the local school district. The objectives of the study were to provide opportunities for improving general communication skills through daily one-on-one interaction between the child and adult; to encourage the

development of concepts through concrete experiences, dialogue, and directed reflective thinking; to assist children in adapting their language to the language of the classroom through the use of trade books to learn about framework, sequence of events, and new experiences; and to encourage self-motivated learning through positive, sucessful learning experiences each day.

Students were pretested using The Boehm Test of Basic Concepts (The Psychological Corporation, 1986). The 18 students in each class with the lowest scores were assigned randomly to the control or experimental group. Students in the control group received no treatment. Students in the experimental group were tutored in groups of three students to one adult for thirty minutes every day, October through April. Tutors were volunteer adults from the community trained by the researchers. Treatment consisted of reading stories using trade books; building language, concepts, and story structure through questioning strategies; and building concepts using concrete objects, flannel board cutouts, and pencil-and-paper techniques. Students were post-tested using a different form of the same test. Experimental group students improved their test scores more than did control group students in each of the classrooms. Differences ranged from one to six points across the four classes. These students will be compared again at the end of their first grade experience, to check for differences in first year reading achievement.

The intervention strategies based on research and used in this study could be incorporated into day-care programs beginning at the two-year-old level. These children would then arrive at kindergarten better prepared to meet the needs of the school curriculum. The problem lies in the absence of trained caretakers for young children in day-care situations.

Curriculum designed to meet the needs of children twenty years ago does not meet these needs as we understand them today. With the changing social structure of society, young children are being placed in child care situations for longer periods of time. Recent research has established that more than 50% of mothers of preschol children are working outside the home. In addition, there has been a 32% increase in the number of children of non-employed mothers enrolled in preschool programs (Hymes, 1988; SACUS, 1986). Considering children of all ages who have full-time employed parents, 46% have no identifiable child care arrangements (Children's Defense Fund, 1982). Many of these 46% are looking after themnselves. Parents who must cope with work as well as child care have a higher rate of absenteeism from work. Competent child care, on the other hand, increases worker satisfaction and productivity (Committee for Economic Development, 1987).

The quality of child care ultimately rests on those who provide that care. Insufficient or poor-quality care means lost developmental and educational opportunities for children. A critical concern for teacher educators then is the training of those caretakers of young children.

The NAEYC (National Association of Young Children) has suggested a number of professional avenues for training child care workers: Early Childhood Teacher Assistant (Level 1); Early Childhood Associate Teacher (Level 2); Early Childhood Teacher (Level 3); and Early Childhood Specialist (Level 4). The training recommendations of this organization currently exceed most state requirements. A suggested recommendation is that untrained employees entering the field at the Assistant level should have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Once employed, these persons would participate in professional development programs as a part of an inservice training requirement. A Center Director is generally responsible for the inservice training and professional

development provided for Level 1 personnel. States are not consistent in standards set for directors, however, and this results in a wide variety of training programs - some excellent, others not (NAEYC, 1984).

Secondary programs are a logical choice for providing training for persons at Assistant (Level 1) positions who work under the supervision of more highly trained persons. Current structure of secondary programs permits training through home economics and/or other vocational programs. These programs could easily be expanded to include classes for adult students. Florida's current twenty clock hours of training requirement is an example of a model for this level (McNair, 1988).

Certification at the national level is suggested for Child Development Associate (CDA), Level II positions. This certification originated as a method of providing training for Head Start employees and is generally provided by post secondary institutions. In spite of the national certification process, however, the type of training and curricula used in the training varies widely. The Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition and NAEYC have recently surveyed post-secondary institutions in order to identify available programs, and as a result, information contained in their National Directory of Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs could be used to project recommendations for uniform training. Currently, two major weaknesses can be found in the CDA Training: 1) Training may or may not include credit that is applicable to a degree; and 2) CDA credentials (ie. Day Care) are earned in one setting. For a person to get a credential in a second setting (ie. Infant/Toddler, Family Day Care) they must register and proceed all the way through the system from the beginning (Competence, 1987).

These problems might be solved with consistent course requirements at the junior college and vocational school level. CDA compentency areas should be correlated to specific course requirements which result in college credit.

Training at Level III, (Early Childhood Teacher) and Level IV, (Early Childhood Specialist), belong at the post-secondary level, with four-year institutions. Level IV programs should be designed to have strong components in personnel supervision and administration as part of the early childhood curriculum.

There is a need for teacher educators to work closely with secondary schools and vocational schools in a effort to establish clear-cut guidelines for consistent standards and training requirements for persons working with young children. The committment to provide quality programs for preschool and kindergarten children is a goal which might best be attained with consistency among state requirements.

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